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ABSTRACT

Children develop emotional intelligence during the early years of life, and according to some experts, emotional intelligence is a more reliable predictor of academic achievement than is IQ. However, today's children appear to be low on emotional well-being. This has potentially negative consequences, not only for academic achievement but also for personal relationships. Literature has the potential of fostering emotional intelligence by providing vicarious emotional experiences that will shape the brain circuits for empathy and help the child gain insight into human behavior. Literature will also promote language learning by enriching learners' vocabulary and modeling new linguistic structures. Moreover, literature can provide a motivating and low-anxiety context for language learning. Some successful literature-based strategies are offered to help teachers develop students' personal and emotional intelligence while also developing language skills, and demonstrate how these strategies can be adapted to different grade and proficiency levels. Emphasis is on the teaching of English as a second language. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/MSE)

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Emotional intelligence through literature

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Emotional intelligence through literature

Abstract

Children develop emotional intelligence during the early years of life, and according to some experts, emotional intelligence is a more reliable predictor of academic achievement than the IQ. However, today's children seem to be low on emotional well being. This has potentially negative conseqaences, not only on their academic achievement, but also on their personal relationships.

Literature has the potential of fostering emotional intelligence by providing vicarious emotional experiences that will shape the brain circuits for empathy and help the child gain insight into human behavior. Literature will also promote language learning by enriching learners' vocabulary and modeling new structures. Moreover, literature can provide a motivating and low-anxiety context for language learning.

In this paper, the author will share some successful literature-based strategies that help foster personal and emotional intelligence while developing students' language skills and demonstrate how these strategies can be adapted to different grade and proficiency levels.

Emotional intelligence through literature

There are a number of good reasons for using literature in a language class, but this paper will examine the potential of literature in nurturing emotional intelligence and caring communication.

Children develop emotional intelligence during the first 15-16 years of life as the two amygdala, which control the messages between emotions and thinking, gradually mature. According to Daniel Goleman (1995), emotional intelligence is a more reliable predictor of academic achievement that the IQ. Emotionally intelligent children apparently perform better in academic tasks than those less so. One can relate this to the ELT class and argue that emotional intelligence is also a factor in second language learning. Today's children, however, seem to be low on emotional well-being in general, and consequently lack the ability to empathize, negotiate and cooperate, and often cannot feel optimistic and hopeful about the future. This has potentially negative consequences, first on their academic achievement, and second, on their interpersonal relationships. These two factors together will influence these children's psychosocial development and potentially lead to behavior problems, alienation, and perhaps aggression and violence.

Goleman (1995:9) defines emotional intelligence as "knowing what one's feelings are and using that knowledge to make good decisions". It is also the ability to maintain hope and an optimistic outlook in the face of disappointments and difficulties. He also defines emotional intelligence as empathy, which is awareness of the feelings of others. According to him, empathy develops as a result of experience and interaction with others. Referring to recent brain research, Goleman further suggests that "... repeated emotional lessons of a child's life literally shape the brain circuits for that response." Empathy can thus become a life-long skill through appropriate learning experiences. I have argued elsewhere that literature has the potential of nurturing emotional intelligence by providing vicarious emotional experiences that may help shape the brain circuits for empathy (Ghosn 1999, 1998). A child who lacks personal experiences with empathy

may, through repeated vicarious experiences provided by literature, develop some readiness for empathy. Carefully selected literature can also introduce the immigrant L2 child to the language of empathy and caring in the new language and thus facilitate recognition and expression of empathic feelings. Pat Pinset (1996) of Roehampton Institute has actually argued that lack of exposure to story may *limit* (emphasis mine) the development of empathy in children. I have to agree, especially in the case of children not experiencing or observing empathy frequently.

Quality literature can help the child also gain insight into human behavior, and demonstrate that there is always hope, and that one can overcome even seemingly insurmountable obstacles (Vandergrift 1990; Sutherland & Arbuthnot 1991; Bettelheim 1976). Literature will also promote language learning by enriching learner's vocabulary and modeling new structures. (Crystal 1987; Hill 1986) Most importantly, quality literature provides models for rich, natural language and a variety of different registers. To quote Bassnett and Grundy (1993:7)

> *Literature is a high point of language usage; arguably it marks the greatest skills a language user can demonstrate. Anyone who wants to acquire a profound knowledge of language that goes beyond the utilitarian will read literary texts in that language.*

I don't think that anyone in the ELT profession would like to argue that L2 learners be left at the utilitarian level of language, especially in contexts where the L2 is the community language or the vehicle of academic instruction. (Exceptions to this, of course, might be specialty ESP courses, where utility is the very aim.) Moreover, literature can provide a motivating and low-anxiety context for language learning. Children are naturally drawn to stories and many language learners come from backgrounds rich in story and storying. Although this article focuses on teaching English to children, it is important to note that well-chosen children's literature can be used with adult learners as well.

Following are some suggestions for literature response activities that can both help develop language skills and nurture emotional intelligence.

Scripting

This activity is best used with stories where one of the characters is experiencing setbacks or disappointments without much support from the other characters. Students are invited to add script that shows 1) what the others could have said or done that would have made the character feel better; 2) what the character could have said to the others to let them know how s/he was feeling and why. This activity can also be done with picture storybooks where children can add speech bubbles to the illustrations.

Making others feel better

Select stories that depict situations from the story where emotions are clearly evident. For example, Alexander and the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day (Judith Viorst1972, illustrations Ray Cruz) is an excellent picture storybook (also for adults). The story is about a little boy who is having a really miserable day. Everything possible goes wrong, and no one seems to care very much.

After reading the story, display the illustration (See Figure 1.) from the story. Have pupils identify the characters in the picture. Then ask how they think Alexander (the boy on the ground) is feeling. List the suggestions on the board. Ask students to justify their suggestions, either based on the illustration or on what they remember from the story. For example, *sad, upset, hurting* are some possibilities. Ask pupils what in the picture in particular tells something about the boy's feelings. Invite students to share their own similar experiences. Ask students what the others are doing or saying. (In the story, Alexander's brothers (the other two boys in the picture) do not say anything that would comfort him or make him feel better. Students usually can quickly identify the situation, even if they have not read the story or don't remember the exact words.

This will also be an opportunity to invite students to go back to the story and re-read relevant parts. "Come on, don't be a cry-baby," was what one of the boys actually said. Then ask if that in any way makes Alexander feel better. (Obviously not.) Now, ask students to think about themselves in the position of the two boys. What could they possibly say to Alexander that might make him feel better. Have students work in pairs to write a script for the picture. Older students can add longer dialogue parts to the story.

Are you OK., brother? Does it hurt very much? Would you like

me to go get Mom?

These captions were reported by one teacher, while another class generated statements like

It's OK. Here, let me help you. Don't worry about your pants.

I will explain to Mom what happened.

When reading longer stories, select an excerpt that presents an appropriate situation for examination. Discuss the emotions involved and the different characters' potential role in making a positive change. Proceed as described above.

This activity gets students to think about how others feel and what appropriate responses might be. Thus, we can teach pro-social communication. In terms of language skills, this will be a good opportunity to practice conditionals with *could, should, would. What do you think they could say? What would you say to Alexander?* Reported speech can also be activated during the discussion: *Zeinab says that they could ask him if he needs help.*

Sharing one's own feelings

It is also important for us to learn to identify our own feelings and let others know how we feel. Again, looking at Alexander, the question that needs to be asked is *What could Alexander tell his brothers so that they would know how he feels?* Invite pupils to work in pairs to write speech bubbles for Alexander. Have pupils share their suggestions with the class and discuss what reactions each suggestion might evoke. Have pupils write possible responses. Discuss which responses would generate the most positive feelings.

In terms of language, we have again a meaningful context within which to practice modals and reported speech, two fairly difficult concepts for Primary school pupils.

The same procedure can be followed with older students with longer texts.

Feeling Detective – Knowing how people feel

Reading body language

It will be difficult to know what to do or say to someone if we don't know how others feel. We can use literature and illustration art to help pupils 'read' feelings. Sometimes

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we can tell how a person feels by looking at them. To teach pupils how to read body language, select an illustration from a story such as the above-mentioned story about Alexander's miserable day. (See Figure 2.)

Invite pupils to think about the story and then examine the body language of the character/s in the illustration. How does the character's body language show his feelings? For example, Alexander is disappointed, and it shows in his slumped posture and facial expression. Ask pupils how they show their disappointment. Then ask about the other characters whose feelings are not explicitly mentioned in the story but show in the illustration. For example, how does boy A. feel and how can we tell? (He is smiling and showing the toy he got in his cereal box. He is clearly pleased.)

Detecting feelings in text

This is a good activity that requires students to return to the text to find evidence for their interpretations while they try to figure out how the author reveals the characters' emotions. Students should know that in stories, authors use words to show how the characters feel. Sometimes they use specific words that tell the reader directly about the feelings, but sometimes the reader needs to read texts closely to identify the characters' feelings in given situations and how they are expressed; in words, in behaviors, in silence, etc. This is not always easy, but with practice pupils will gain insight that will be helpful in real life. Select excerpts from stories that pupils have read, some explicitly describing the feelings, others more indirect. (See Figure 3.) Invite pupils to read the excerpts and to determine how the characters are feeling. They should support their responses with evidence from the text. If pupils have differing opinions, encourage the class to find the excerpt in the text and read around it to determine which suggestion is most accurate. Encourage students also to think in what other ways people may show the given emotions. This activity reinforces critical reading for details and making inferences.

Feeling hunt

The following activity will reinforce vocabulary that pupils will need in order to express their feelings in real situations. Identify in the stories that pupils have read as many

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feelings as possible and make a list of appropriate words. Invite pupils to think about stories they have read in class. Ask them to match as many of the words in the list as possible to the feelings of the characters in the stories. (You can make the activity easier by providing also a list of characters. This will be useful if students do not have access to the stories while working on this task.) Remind pupils that one character may experience many different emotions during one story. Encourage pupils to tell how they determined the match. *The Ugly Duckling was sad at the beginning. We know that from the way he was sitting, with his head bent. He also had tears in his eyes. But at the end of the story he was very happy: "I never dreamed of so much happiness..."* Invite students to fill a Feeling Hunt chart for some of the characters. (See Figure 4) The chart can be used as a guide for writing about the character's feelings.

Positive language dictionary

Have pupils find in the stories they read examples of positive expressions that demonstrate caring, empathy, tolerance, cooperation, etc. Have them record these expressions in their 'Positive language dictionary'. They can use their dictionaries in the next activity.

Transforming communication

Pupils will benefit from practicing expressions that reflect caring, empathy, willingness to share and cooperate, etc. Select excerpts where characters experience conflict, disagreement or sadness. Invite pupils to change the dialogue so that it reflects more positive, pro-social communication or have them write in dialogues to that effect. Students can use their 'Positive language dictionaries' in this activity. Encourage sharing of dictionary entries.

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What if I ...?

This is an activity that requires students to reflect on their own emotions in a given situations as experienced by story characters. This works best in small groups where students have an opportunity to exchange ideas about their reactions. The question is raised: *What if I were in the situation of 'X'? What if this happened to me? How would I feel? Why would I feel that way?* It fosters self-awareness by inviting students to provide reasoning for their emotions. The groups can report to the whole class, and a class discussion can bring further ideas that will develop awareness of different ways of reacting to things. A guide sheet with questions and response stems will be helpful. (See Figure 5)

This activity is very useful when introducing or reinforcing conditionals with 'if' because it requires students to put themselves in hypothetical situations, for which the context has already been established.

Revisiting some old favorites

Diary entries

Diary entries are a familiar and popular activity with many teachers, but they are especially useful in introducing discussion about feelings. Before asking pupils to write the diary entry from one of the character's point of view, discuss the story and the feelings involved. The discussion will allow for review of the past tense verbs in a meaningful context and enables the teacher to activate any vocabulary that pupils may need in the activity. When assigning diary entries, it is important to include more than the main character. For example, when writing diary entries on the classic *Ugly Duckling*, it will be interesting to consider not only the duckling but also the feelings of the mother duck in finding an odd addition to her family. Examining her feelings might shed some light on her behavior. Some of the children's stories, in fact, will make excellent reading and discussion material for older learners and adults, if approached from a different

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perspective. Stories such as the *Ugly Duckling,* for example, can be extended to examination of the mother duck and her dilemma. (See Figure 6) The writing activity will be followed by a debriefing, where students share their entries and discuss their reasoning, and their own thoughts while writing.

In its basic form, this activity is justified as a change in point of view requires highly sophisticates inferential skills (Johnson, Louis 1987), and the teacher can quickly assess each student's grasp of the main ideas. However, when the writing activity is accompanied by a pre-writing discussion and a follow-up a debriefing, this activity ca help develop insight into feelings of self and others.

In a language class, the discussions and debriefings provide opportunities to present vocabulary related to emotions and a meaningful reason to return to the text for careful re-reading.

Letters to characters

Writing letters to characters is a familiar activity in literature-based reading classes, and is perfect in getting pupils to practice positive, caring expressions. It requires the writer to infer the character's feelings, empathize, and then think of what might make the character feel better. After reading about a character who faces obstacles, students are first invited to talk about the feelings involved. After the class discussion, students will write letters to the character, saying something that recognizes how the character is feeling and why, and something that might be encouraging or supportive. Pupils can share their letters and evaluate them. In terms of language skills, letter writing can reinforce not only use of vocabulary about feelings, but also the conventions of a friendly letter.

Note: All the activities described can be adapted to different grade and proficiency levels depending upon the type of literature chosen. I have successfully used them in teacher training sessions and university language classes.

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Figure 1.

From: Viorst, Judith (1972) *Alexander and the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day*

Picture © Cruz, Ray 1972

With student-generated captions:

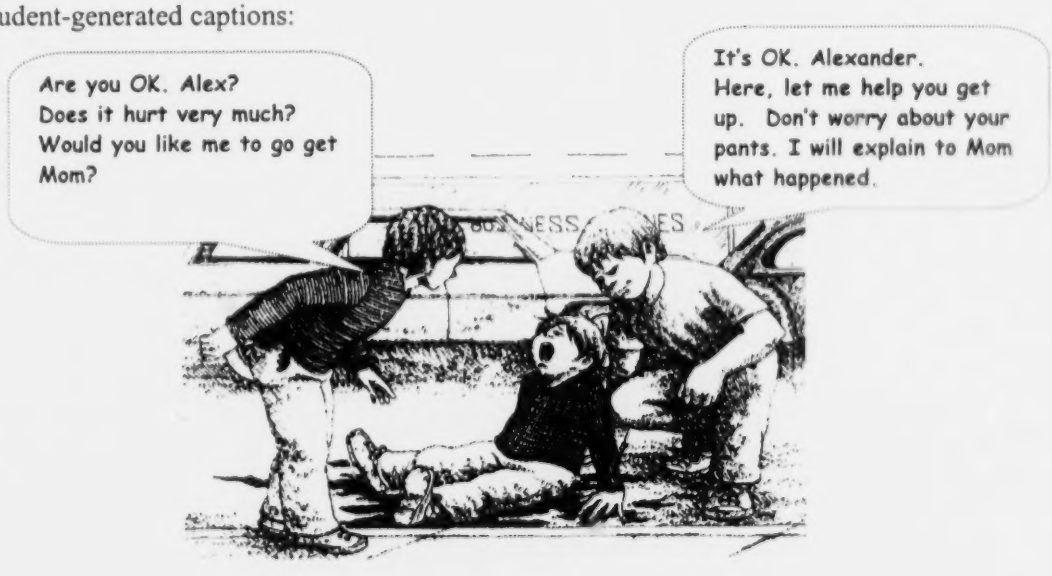
Are you OK. Alex?
Does it hurt very much?
Would you like me to go get Mom?
It's OK. Alexander.
Here, let me help you get up. Don't worry about your pants. I will explain to Mom what happened.

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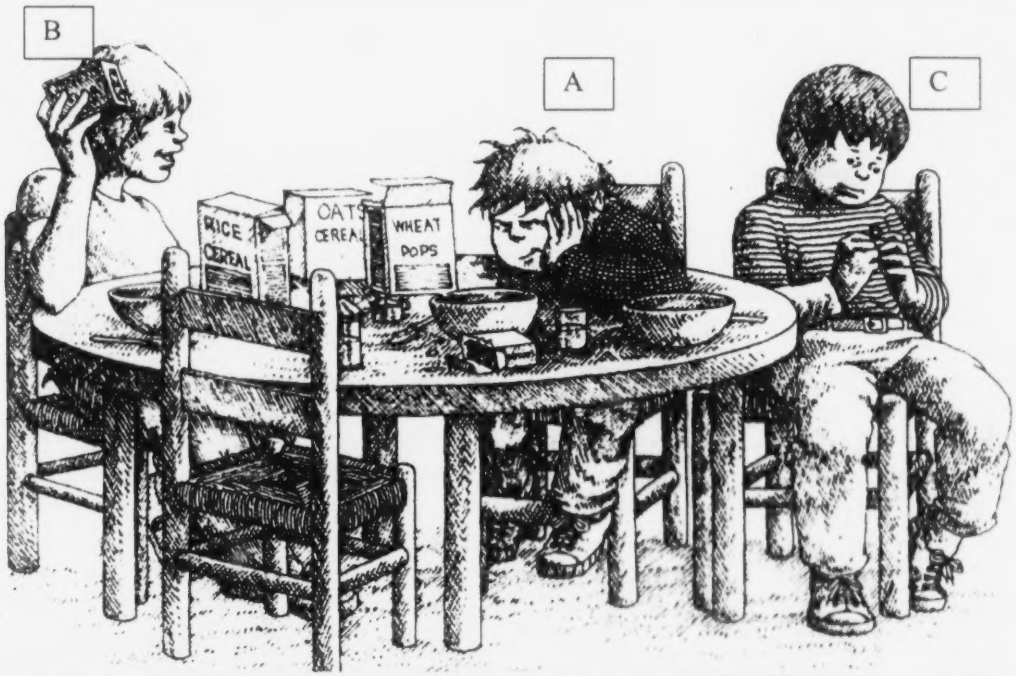
Figure 2. – **Feeling Detective**

Sometimes, we can tell how a person feels by looking at him or her. Look at the picture below and think how each person in the picture is feeling. Then answer the questions.



From: Viorst, Judith (1972) *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*
Picture © Ray Cruz (1972)

1. How do you think the person A. is feeling? .....
2. What makes you think that? .....

.....

3. How do you think the person B. is feeling? .....
4. What makes you think that? .....

.....

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Figure 3. - **How do you know what people are feeling that you read about?**

Read the following excerpts from the stories you have read in class. Tell how the people in the excerpt are feeling and tell what in the text makes you think that.

Dragonfly surprise *(Ghosn, Irma. Beirut: Dar El-Ilm Lilmalayin, 1999)*

Miss Randa stood alone with her face ashen. (p. 20)

Miss Randa feels .... I think so because the text says
.....
.....

Mallika's face broke into a big smile while tears were running down her cheeks. (p. 23)

Mallika feels ..... I think so because .....
.....

The Old Key *(Ghosn, Irma. Beirut: Dar El-Ilm Lilmalayin, 1999)*

Walid's world began to spin as his eyes were fixed on the big old key on the wall. Through the hot tears that suddendly welled in his eyes, he could see the old house... (p.14)

Walid feels ..... I think so because .....

.....

Children Who Hugged the Mountain (Ghosn, Irma. Beirut: Dar El-Ilm Lilmalayin, 1999)

"Hey you kids!" yelled the foreman ... ... hollered the man as he rushed to the cellular telephone in the bulldozer. (p. 12)

The workmen are feeling ..... I can tell that from .....

.....

Mystery of the Missing Mosaics (*Ghosn, Irma. Beirut: Dar El-Ilm Lilmalayin, 1999)*

Roya pretended to read the message while her eyes wondered around the old mosaic. How she loved the colors and designs of this floor!. She could see the people carefully putting it together, piece by piece. Shoe could see the noble ladies stroll across it. (p. 7)

Roya feels ..... I think so because .....

.....

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Figure 4. **Feeling Hunt**

Story	Character	Feeling	Showing it	When?
Ugly Duckling	Duckling	Sad Rejected		At the beginning
		Lonely		
				When finding mother

Figure 6. - **What if...? Question stems**

If you were in Alexander's position, how would you feel?	If I ..... , I would	I would ..... because ....
If this happened to you, how would you feel?	If this happened to me, I would ...	I would .... because
If your best friend lied to you, how would you feel?	If my best friend lied to me, I would ...	That would ... because....

Figure 6. - **Journal entries with a shift in point of view**

This morning I had a frightful experience. All my ducklings were happily learning to cluck and peck for corn. But there was one egg that had not yet hatched. I was a bit worried, but finally it as ready to crack. I waited for my last duckling to emerge, but little did I know what to expect! This was no ordinary duckling. It was big and ugly, and gray. I was shocked and embarrassed. What would all my neighbors say? How could I explain this ugly duckling to them? I had no choice but to chase it away. I felt a bit sorry for the miserable thing, but I cold not keep it. I could not let the other ducks know that this ugly thing was my duckling. By the time my neighbors came to congratulate me, there was no sign of the ugly duckling anymore. What a relief!

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